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Historical Dynamics of Guru-Shishya Tradition: Socio-Religious Canvas in the Bundelkhand Region from the 1840s to the 1900s

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Abstract

The research paper is an attempt to explore the historical dynamics of 'guru-shishya' tradition between 1840s-1980s in Bundelkhand region-while giving emphasis on the transition, both colonial and post-colonial. It examines how primordial ties strengthen the traditional caste, gender and labor relations under the feudal structure. It would further assess whether this tradition embodies any dynamic discourse in the domain in which the said tradition operated i.e. to say, it treats the tradition through a rather dynamic lens than a given static entity. Onwards my research paper would analyse the colonial effect on the aforementioned tradition with the coming of various reforms in the late nineteenth century and whether there was any remarkable shift due to 1857 in the mentioned region. My research paper examines the educational policies of the colonial and post-colonial states to investigate the penetration on said tradition. My research paper ends with the 1980s, which is known for Bandits and New Educational policy to investigate how the said tradition evolves not only literary and educational field but it goes up to bandits system and many areas of life. So, my research paper tries to explore how the said tradition is not always positive but sometimes it creates negative metamorphosing force as well.

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Introduction

Through my research paper I would like to examine the primordial—religion—entity with a focus on the historical dynamics of the 'guru-shishya' tradition between ca. 1840s-1980s in Bundelkhand region. Primordial ties strengthen the traditional caste, gender and labor relations under the feudal structure. Unlike the hitherto studies surrounding the 'guru-shishya' tradition that has been around the problematic of indigenous education, this research paper investigates the presence of the tradition into a much larger social canvas in the Bundelkhand region apart from the ashram life. It also explores the materiality of said tradition and its impact to social sphere. The research paper also explicates the question of agency and structure that has been a contested domain amongst the sociologists – particularly, the “founding fathers” of the discipline, Durkheim, Weber and Marx. The research paper views the tradition, as ‘structure’ and navigates the individual’s agency in order to conceptualize a modelling in the Bundelkhand region—however, the structure is itself takes as been continuously constituting.

Further, the research paper also explores whether or not there were any major changes in the nature said relation with the coming of (colonial) modernity due to the alleged emergence of a social rational “man.” To make sense of this change, the research paper explores the socio-historical question of the structure (of the guru-shishya relation) and agency (of the shishya) and empirically explain the space of/for the latter in the otherwise sustaining life of the former.

The research paper also explicates colonial effect (?) of the said tradition by analyzing the various education reforms in the Bundelkhand region. Further it also explores the social implications of various educational reforms. The educational—*Halkabandi Prayog* (village schools)—reform by Lieutenant-Governor, James Thomason, in 1843 onwards with special focus on present day Mahoba and Chitrakoot District of Bundelkhand region (In aforementioned period both districts come under North West Provinces). These reforms impacted the said tradition and maintenance of a pre-modern status quo amidst an encroaching phenomenon of colonialism.

My research paper—rather than taking the conventional definitions of modernity *prima facie*—also looks at the question of modernity with reference to what Kant explained as the “emergence of man from self-imposed tutelage” i.e., a tutelage of the inability to make use of its own understanding rather than the religiously legitimized ascriptive differences. It takes cues from G. Aloysius for whom modernity ought to be meant as the emergence of an understanding wherein said ascriptive differences do not matter anymore and that all persons should be treated as free and equal rather than otherwise understood definition that rests on technological or industrial or individuating bases (Aloysius: 2018). Since the guru is the epitome of all the ascriptive differences, the (re)adjustment of the relation with the coming of the (colonial) modernity needs to take this definition to better explicate on how problematic and successful was the project of modernity in South Asia. Aloysius further notes the paradoxes of modernity of how it was “imported through the agency of imperialism” (Aloysius: 2018) thus being evaluated in diametrical opposition to nativism, tradition, indignity and thus, anti-colonialism – as seen in the work, “The Beautiful Tree” by Dharampala. However, Aloysius also takes note of how ‘modernity (also) delivers different results under different historical and cultural conditions’ (Aloysius: 2018) thus, the defining feature of modernity being the principle of treating humans as of equal worth rather than taking refuge in tradition.

The research paper also explores the question of the above mentioned “(re)adjustment” as a form of maintenance of the status-quo through Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony which is a system of class-alliance wherein a “hegemonic class” exercises political leadership over the “subaltern classes” by winning them over” by direzinone (or consensus) rather than dominio (or coercion) (Ramos: 1982). Gramsci further notes how a “traditional intellectuals (here; Brahmins) can be supportive agents in the quest for spontaneous consent to the social order.” (ibid.) However, to locate the “agency” of the subaltern (here, the disciple) we also use the interpretation of hegemony by as a stabilizer of ruling class domination via coordination of its interests with those of the subordinate groups by Adam Przeworski – something that Vivek Chibber argues takes the agency of the ruled class rather than being passive consumers of ideological and cultural indoctrination of the ruling class (Chibber: 2006). Arun Kumar terms this as “Dalit Dreams” amongst the competition between American Methodist Missionaries and Arya Samajists to ‘poach’ dalits into their fold for their own interests (Kumar: 2019).

Further, my research paper examines the National Policy on Education 1968, which arose out of the recommendations of the Kothari Commission. My research paper ends with the 1980s, which is known for National Policy on Education 1986 and Bandits System in Bundelkhand. Through this particular analysis, I gauge how much of the post-colonial policy was a continuation of the (neo-) guru-shishya tradition that crystallised and consolidated during the colonial period.

The conventional field that has taken the institution of ‘guru-shishya’ tradition into consideration is naturally education history with the works like that of Poromesh Acharya who focuses – with the case study of Bengal – on the importance of orality in what he terms as the “Brahminical system of education” where – according to Acharya – Brahmins had a monopoly that gave them a leverage to gain ideological control and helped them become the natural leaders of the rural society (Nigel Crook: 1996, pp 105). Furthermore, Acharya also takes note of the guru-shishya relationship being

that of an absolute authority and perfect loyalty that the caste system legitimized (Poromesh Acharya, 1978, pp. 6). Nonetheless, the explicit focus on educational aspect leaves behind the social life of the said tradition that may or may not be a monopoly of a certain caste. Similarly, V. Kaladharan analyses the Indian Gurukul system and the impact of colonial education on it.

On the other hand, Parimala V. Rao upturn the various formulations about indigenous education was oral, informal, and Brahmin dominated (Rao, 2020, pp. 50). She also shows that British officers praised the Brahmin teachers or gurus, denying the role of non-Brahmin teachers in schools, thus arguing that the colonial education system strengthened and rigidified the Indian caste system. (Rao, 2020, pp. 242). However, Rao limits her research paper to studying only eighty years under EIC and does not go into much broader colonial agency in the social life.

Daniel Gold too examines the case study of guru, Thakur Mansingh Kushwah (1909–83), known to his disciples as Malik Sahib’s ashram at Gwalior. However, he does not focus on the changing social life of the devotees in ashram; devotees seem only spectator. In fact, he goes on to claim that “guru sometimes even taken as a living embodiment of the divine”. (Daniel Gold, 2015, pp. 192).

Indeed, a lot of anthropological and ethnological works have been done on ‘guru-shishya’ tradition—especially on ‘guruship’. Where most scholars deal ‘guruship’ as a kind of principle and also look at their multiple roles in South Asian society, other scholars focus on the concept of guruship beyond the ashram life (Latour, 199; Spencer 1997) and explicate on the social positions that the gurus, broadly defined, occupied in the society with various phrases like ‘the governing guru’, ‘the cosmopolitan guru’ etc.

In a similar vein, in ‘The Guru in South Asia’ edited by Jacob Copeman and Aya Ikegame, the focus is on the multifarious dimensions of ‘guru’ in South Asian life. They analyse the ways in which the guru tradition has refashioned and re-situated itself within a neo-liberal economic and political agenda of the Indian state and other international organisations by looking at the very ‘localised’ guru institutions called mathas in Kannada (Jacob Copeman and Aya Ikegame, 2012: pp 47). They also talk about guruship with the same line of argumentation like kingship in south Indian political culture—thus the case study of Karnataka matha is described as ‘reorganization of the modernist social order’ (Ibid: pp. 59). In other words, Ikegame tried to draw attention to the political culture of the Hindu religion in South India but how generalised this phenomenon is for the entire subcontinent is to be understood with an empirical case study like that my proposal aims for.

Others like Ashis Nandy point out the particularity of ‘private connotations’ of “Indian” concept of power—namely that of self-control that regulates the ‘instinctual and materialistic self’ (Nandy: 1980, pp 51). A similar connection of power and anti-materiality (i.e., spirituality) ought to be made with the dominance of guru in the said tradition too to extrapolate the social ramifications of the tradition. Christophe Jefferlot draws a cultural continuity of the ‘Hindu’ pattern of king seeking guidance of a purohita for political legitimacy with the case study of Indira Gandhi and Jiddhu Krishnamurti (Jacob Copeman and Aya Ikegame, 2012: pp 83). Ikegame thus notes that kingship and religion are ‘inextricable interwoven’ wherein, ‘the relation between the rajah and the rishi and the relation between rajniti and dharma are like the relation of soul and body’ (ibid., pp. 86)—something which—

Ikegame argues—continues with the RSS where the metaphor guru goes beyond the flag as the organization defines itself as a collective guru. Similarly, Anil Sooklal analyses the cultural continuity and influence of the ‘guru-shishya parampara’ from the Vedic Age to the contemporary times.

However, the absence flux of change that goes along with temporality of continuity by the above essentialises the tradition (of the spiritualist ‘orient’ against the materialist ‘occident’) in to-to. Indeed, Lawrence Cohen points out the materialist dimension of the said relation wherein the ‘totality of future gift’ i.e., dakshina (Ibid., pp. 103) is what streamlines the functionality of the tradition (unlike, what Nandy argues). Others like Karen Pechilis and Veena Das talks about the presence of female gurus and trace of the tradition in Islamism, respectively—though in a similar *dictatum erat* epistemological light.

Hitherto mentioned scholar assume persuasion (of the disciple) based solely on consent—relegating the dimension of rhetoric. Kathinka Frøystad, however, talks about Aristotelian tripartition of logos with respect to discipleship for the functioning of the said relationship. Kirin Narayan further examines how gurus— anonymized as Swamiji—employed narratives in their religious teaching. How these ‘rhetorics’ mutated with impeding changes is however, not given its due share of academic investigation. Although, Maya Warrier studies the aspects of ‘katha tradition’ and how the disciple thence experiences and negotiates—both individually and collectively—the overwhelming conditioning of tradition amidst impeding modernity, again, which she defines in rather narrow terms.

Nevertheless, all the above-mentioned works explicate on the agency (and action) of the guru and its multi-faceted aspects—relegating the agency (and reaction) of the ‘shishya’ (disciple). Exceptions to this rule are scholars like Jeremy G. Morse who with the case study of Datta Sampradāya, a Western Indian religious tradition which has the based on the devotion to a guru. Employing the Marathi liturgical text, the Gurucaritra (composed c. 1550 C.E.) written by Gaṅgādhara, Morse explores the forces that have shaped the tradition, and in so doing, to engender dialogue about how the figure of the guru functions in struggles for socio-religious power and ideological hegemony to maintain the pre-modern status-quo. However, Morse has took up the conventional defining features of modernity i.e. individualism, or rational. My research paper looks at question of modernity with reference to Kant’s “emergence of man from self-imposed tutelage.”

Such notion of imposed tutelage has been explored by William R. Pinch by drawing attention towards the shared ground of slavery and discipleship and relationship between guru and chela. With the case study of Kulapahar village in present-day Mahoba district, of Bundelkhand in the eighteenth century, he compares discipleship and slavery on the basis of social death and stresses the intersection of questions of slavery, family, and discipleship. However, the extreme case of social death that assumes total coercion rather than consensus makes the said analogy a bit skewed.

Allison Busch—employing sources on language, literature and religio-philosophical traditions like Padmakar’s verses—further notes a ‘cultural conversation’ through the registration of new genres from the west, though still rooted in a ‘tradition.’ Furthermore, Robert Van De Walle talks about two types of poetry in the 19th century north India; one, Braj Poetry associated with tradition and stagnation and two, Khari Boli that embodies modernity, literary innovation, and nationalism. However, now equal—in terms of setting the

agenda of the said ‘conversation’ within the dimension of religion-philosophy—was between the participant agents is scantily touched.

Beyond the typified attention towards ‘Hinduism,’ Rob Preece draws attention towards the psychological understanding of guru-disciple relationship in Buddhism. Preece argues how guru is not person-centered; it is authority-centered. (Ibid: pp 176). However, Preece too due to his non-materialist study, absolves the materialist ramifications of the relationship and concludes that the tension between the two agents can be solved with a ‘correct’ psychological functioning.

Furthermore, Dipesh Chakrabarty delves into how with the sardars and babus, primordial identities were maintained regardless of the so-called formation of ‘class’ that was supposed to substitute the primordial identities. He talks how the ‘sardar’s domination was not based on fear alone... fear had to be balanced by respect’ and how the sardar dominated the life in the working-class bustis and bazaars’ (Ibid: pp. 110) and how this ‘respect’ had roots in pre-capitalist culture. This seems akin to the guru-shishya relationship. However, Chakravarty presumes culture as given—thus essentialising it—and relegating and form of dynamics that the labour relation can have amidst colonialism.

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